

*Illusion and Reality in a Case of Mediumship*

MARGERY by Thomas R. Tietze. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Pp. xxii + 50. \$6.95.

This book, like *Singer in the Shadows*, the strange story of Patience Worth by Irving Litvag, revives an old mystery for an audience born too late to have known it first hand. However, it is probably less than fair to Patience to mention her and Margery in the same sentence, as I will indicate.

Margery was Boston's famous (or infamous) medium of the 1920's. Tietze has carefully pieced together her story from such surviving materials as are still available. From them he traces her career from an apparently fairly innocent beginning to her final inglorious end.

The mediumship began soon after Margery's marriage to Dr. L. G. Crandon, a prominent (though rather tarnished) Boston surgeon. From Tietze's account, it appears that Crandon's interest in the possibility of spirit communication was the originating cause of his wife's mediumship. Certainly over the following years, as ever more astonishing exploits occurred in her séance room, he was the ever-present watchdog, if not the guiding (incarnate) spirit of the productions. The guiding (discarnate) spirit soon became Margery's deceased brother Walter, who, during the heyday of the "spectacular," entertained, shocked, and puzzled a developing clientele which came to include some of the most illustrious names of the day, both in and out of psychical research.

The reported phenomena were mainly of the physical kind, which, if genuine, would now be classed as instances of psychokinesis (PK). Also, if genuine, they would be outstanding, even today. One of the phenomena was the "independent voice," supposedly Walter's; another was the ringing of a bell in a "bell-box" so constructed that such ringing would have been normally impossible under the alleged conditions of control; still another was the production of paraffin "gloves" in which the wrists were too small for a human hand to have been withdrawn by normal means. Many other wonders were reported and, frequently, ectoplasm appeared in various grisly forms (suggesting, to a medical skeptic, lung tissue from a slaughtered animal).

But why enumerate the various devices by which a mainly glib set of followers and admirers were entertained? As the proceedings developed, even those experimenters who might have known better were either "converted" or excluded by Crandon. My husband and I fell into the latter class after he raised a critical question at the close of our single but eye-opening evening. Certainly, none of the visitors to the séances were permitted by Crandon to exercise the kind of control over the proceedings that could have prevented the more flagrant kinds of fraud. The several investigations by committees (one from the *Scientific American*) were unable to endorse the case.

Tietze sums the whole thing up under three possibilities: genuine, fraud, or some of each. No one well informed and in his right mind could honestly entertain the first, although Margery could perhaps have started out that way. It seems from this account that Crandon himself may have been honest initially, but an extraneous motive must have contaminated his purpose. It was not money but the enjoyment of fame that the situation, for a time, gave him.

The mystery that Tietze finds in the mediumship arises largely, I think, from the fact that most of the sources he was able to find came from, or were connected with, Margery's partisans. Margery was an attractive woman. J. Malcolm Bird, the editor of the *Scientific American*, was only one of those whose judgment came to be warped by his personal involvement in the case; and he, like some others in the same predicament, published rather voluminously about it, while those who maintained objectivity—like Dr. Walter Franklin Prince and Dr. William McDougall—wrote or were published only sparingly.

If, in trying to be impartial, then, a third party like Tietze has to judge on a one-to-one basis, the balance is likely to go to the side of the more prolific. For instance, a report of a meeting between Margery and Dr. McDougall quoted from Margery's account rings very untrue to anyone who knew Dr. McDougall. He just would not have sounded as Margery made him sound, nor would he have come off from the meeting looking as foolish as she made him look. And he left no record of the meeting to counteract the impression left by Margery's account.

Also, in trying to be impartial, Tietze necessarily relies frequently

on remarks made by Crandon to others regarding conditions and circumstances. But since Crandon appears likely to have had much more interest in preserving the mediumship than the truth, his statements about anything are suspect.

The reason, then, why Margery's mystery does not compare with that of Patience Worth is that Margery was obviously so fraudulent that if she did occasionally produce genuine phenomena, their value is essentially lost in the haze. The mystery of Patience Worth, on the other hand, remains a mystery today, even if probably not a parapsychological one, since it is not a question of who she was, but how Mrs. Curran could have produced her and the literature that appeared in her name.

This book *Margery*, then, is one of differing values depending on the reader. For the parapsychologist it has none directly, although it does give a picture of a period of psychical research in the U. S., the prominence of mediumship then, and the role of McDougall and of Harvard (since the Harvard personalities Boring, Shapley, and several who were graduate students at the time were drawn into the case in varying degrees), not to mention several European investigators who became involved. Thus it has some value for the historian and also for the average reader, who can get from it considerable entertainment. For Tietze, one hopes it is the beginning of a long career of equally careful and earnest adventures into the varied past of parapsychological persons, places, and movements that led up to the scene today.

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### *Observations and Speculations*

THE POLTERGEIST by William G. Roll. New York: New American Library, Signet Books, 1974. (Paperback) \$1.25.

It has been very interesting to me to see to what extent our knowledge of poltergeist phenomena and their causes has increased in the ten years since I wrote my book, *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* My principal reaction is one of satisfaction on various counts. At the time that I wrote, the evidential status of poltergeist and